

Knowledge, Learning Institutions and Libraries in Islam: Book Publishing and Paper Making

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This short article describes the high regard with which Muslim Civilisation has held libraries as centres of knowledge. It reviews major contributions in the field and in particular to our modern books and libraries.

Sardar and Davies write that:



Figure 1. A class at the Gazanfar Aga Madrasa. Topkapi Palace Museum Library, H. 889.

'The vast book publishing industry in the Western world is truly awesome and certainly cannot be praised enough. But this recent Western achievement cannot eclipse an equally awesome, sophisticated and wide-ranging publication industry that first grew in the Muslim civilisation around the middle of the eighth century, almost one thousand years before books appeared in the same quantity and quality in the West. The vast industry was still in existence when Europe began to occupy Muslim lands, and was systematically killed off by the colonial powers, along with the Muslim systems of education and medicine and other cultural institutions.' [1]

Indeed, ten or so centuries ago, as Scott outlines, the situation was the very opposite of what we have today:

'Under the conditions of intellectual culture which characterised Moslem and Christian society even a greater inequality prevailed. The library of Mostandir, Sultan of Egypt, contained eighty thousand volumes; that of the Fatimids of Cairo, a million; that of Tripoli, two hundred thousand; in the thirteenth century, when Bagdad was sacked by the Mongols, the books cast into the Tigris completely covered its surface, and their ink dyed its waters black, while a far greater number were destroyed by fire; the public collections of the Moorish Khalifate of Spain were seventy in number ... The collections of many private individuals were proportionately large. In that of Ibn-al-Mathran, the physician of Saladin, were ten thousand manuscripts; upon the shelves of Dunasch-ben-Tamin, the great Jewish surgeon of Cairo, were more than twenty thousand. Four centuries afterwards few books existed in Christian Europe excepting those preserved in monasteries; the royal library of France consisted of nine hundred volumes, two-thirds of which were theological works; their subjects were limited to pious homilies, the miracles of saints, the duties of obedience to

ecclesiastical superiors.' [2]

Mackensen and Pinto have written extensively on Islamic libraries of the Middle Ages, highlighting their place and role in Islamic society [3]. So widespread were public book collections that it was impossible to find a Mosque or a learning institution of any sort, throughout the lands of Islam, without a collection of books placed at the disposal of students or readers [4]. Baghdad, for instance, prior to the Mongols, had 36 public libraries and over a hundred book-dealers, some of whom were also publishers employing a corps of copyists [5]. In Merw, in Eastern Persia, around 612-614H/1216-1218CE, there were 10 libraries, two in the chief Mosque and the remainder in the Madrasas [6]. In Marrakech, the Kutubya Mosque was so named, because around 200 Kutubiya or book sellers had assembled their booths around that Mosque erected by the Almohad ruler Abd al-Mumin, and they had given their name to it [7]. Spain alone had seventy public libraries [8]. There were similar libraries in Cairo, Aleppo and the major cities of Iran, Central Asia and Mesopotamia [9]. Adud al-Daula (d. 372H/983CE), founded a library in Shiraz, which, in the words of al-Muqaddasi was:

'a complex of buildings surrounded by gardens with lakes and waterways. The buildings were topped with domes, and comprised an upper and a lower storey with a total, according to the chief official, of 360 rooms....In each department, catalogues were placed on a shelf... the rooms were furnished with carpets...' [10]

In addition to the central government libraries, there was a huge network of public libraries in most big cities, and prestigious private collections which attracted scholars from all parts of the Muslim world [11]. Writing on the Muslim Spanish libraries, Scott writes:

'Nor must the libraries be omitted from this list of those factors of progress which so signally contributed to public enlightenment and to the formation of national character. There was no city of importance without at least one of these treasure-houses of literature. Their shelves were open to every applicant. Catalogues facilitated the examination of the collections and the classification of the various subjects. Many of the volumes were enriched with illuminations

of wonderful beauty; the more precious were bound in embossed leather and fragrant woods; some were inlaid with gold and silver. Here were to be found all the learning of the past and all the discoveries of the present age, the philosophy of Athens, the astronomy of Babylon, the science of Alexandria, the results of prolonged observation and experiment on the towers and in the laboratories of Cordova and Seville.' [12]



Figure 2. The first pages of the hand written manuscript of the Hajji Khalifa's *Jihannuma*. Suleymaniye Library, Haci Mahmud 5616.

The Mosque was the central focus of intellectual activity and medium of book diffusion. In the Mosques writers and scholars recounted the results of their studies to audiences of young people, other scholars and interested laymen, and as the cultural basis of the intellectual activity was common to all, anyone and everyone could take part in discussion [13]. This intellectual activity spurred book diffusion through the Mosques as explained by Sardar and Davies:

'When a writer wished to publish a book, he first made notes and then wrote out an original manuscript (asl) which was initially called the 'draft' (muswadda). While such a draft naturally had a value, it did not constitute publication. The word used for publication, kharraja, means 'let (it) go out' or even 'come out' or 'be published'. The author was thus required to present his book to the public. This he did in the Mosque by oral reading or dictation.

Scholars would dictate numerous volumes of their work in the Mosques where the general public gathered to hear them and professional warraqs copied and turned dictations into books. Even when the books were especially commissioned, they would still be published in this way. For example, a prominent ninth-century philologist, al-Farra (d. 206H/822CE) was asked by a friend to write a book to

guide him in the understanding of the Qur'an so that he would not be ashamed when the Emir, to whom he was attached, asked him questions about any passage from it. Al-Farra, who lived in Baghdad, agreed. He also announced that he would dictate a book of this nature in the Mosque - and it is in this way that the work was published.' [14].

The Mosques played another central role, acting as libraries. One of the noblest traditions long held by the Muslims was to bequeath their manuscripts and book collections, sometimes thousands of volumes, to the Mosques [15]. Pedersen explains that from the beginning, Mosques were not just devoted to worship, but were also schools and seats of learning, and so it was normal that people should give their libraries to the Mosques, and an entire book collection might be transferred to a Mosque as a self-contained library or *dar al-kutub* [16]. Throughout the Muslim lands, from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf and beyond, Muslims regarded their places of worship as havens for the safe keeping of their valued books, and so in large numbers, they bequeathed them their collections. In Al-Qayrawan, the manuscripts were endowed to students by those who sought Allah's favour and His pleasure with them, as was recorded on many such manuscripts [17]. And similarly, al-Zaidi founded a Mosque and library named after him, and before his death gifted his own private collection to 'all students and seekers of knowledge.' [18] Al-Jaburi reported that Naila Khatun, a wealthy widow of Turkish origin, founded a Mosque in memory of her deceased husband, Murad Afandi. She attached to the Mosque a Madrasa and a library for which she reportedly bought many valuable books and manuscripts [19]. In Aleppo, the largest and probably the oldest Mosque library, the Sufiya, located at the city's Grand Umayyad Mosque, contained a large book collection of which 10,000 volumes were reportedly bequeathed by the city's most famous ruler, Prince Sayf al-Dawla [20]. Scholars too followed the same path. In Iraq, the Abu Hanifa Mosque had an impressive library, which benefited from the gifts of private collections, amongst which was one by the physician, Yahia Ibn Jazla (d. 493H/1099CE) and the writer-historian al-Zamakhshari (d. 538H/1143CE) [21]. Al-Fasi states that in 955H/1548CE, the Qarawiyyin teacher, Abu Abd Allah Muhammad al-Ajmawi, bequeathed his large work, al-Qawl al-Mutabar to the students of the Mosque [22], and Ibn Khaldun bequeathed to the same Mosque library his Kitab al-Ibar, to be lent only to trustworthy men for the period of two months [23]. Three scholars, amongst whom was Yaqut, bequeathed their collections as waqf to the Zaidi Mosque library [24]. Most often, this gesture was a mark of gratitude by the scholar towards the Mosque for their upkeep and support [25].

Writing on this, Mackensen observes:

'Books were presented and many a scholar bequeathed his library to the Mosque of his city to ensure its preservation and to render the books accessible to the learned who frequented it. And so grew up the great universities of Cordova and Toledo to which flocked Christians as well as Moslems from all over the world, and the famous al-Azhar in Cairo, which after almost a thousand years is still the most famous educational centre of the Mohammedan world.' [26]

If the majority of Mosques had modest libraries, some contained absolutely rich collections, including some rare and inestimable collections. Many scientific works could have found their way into Mosques, according to Sibai, as a gesture of gratitude by scientists for being granted material comfort, free accommodation and stationary [27]. Indeed, it was common for Mosques to shelter and assist travelling scholars. Al-Ghazali and al-Baghdadi lived for a period of time in one of the minarets of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus [28], whilst Ibn al-Haytham is said to have resided for a while in a qubba (domed room) above one of the main entrances of the Al-Azhar Mosque [29]. Yaqut, for instance, on his death in 627H/1229 CE, left his books as waqf (pious bequest) to the Zaidi shrine (also known as the Zaydi Mosque) on Dinar Street in Baghdad [30], and so did Al-Baghdadi [31]. The Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, Islam's third holiest shrine, had four libraries. It had several book collections in the Nahawiya and Ashrafia Madrasas, and a library of even greater stature: the Farisiya Madrasa. Next to it is the Mosque of Umar which was founded during the reign of the second caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab (Caliph 12-23H/634-644CE). It developed rapidly into an important academy for religious and secular studies and included a large book collection which was scattered among the Mosque's four Madrasas. One of these was the Nassiriyah Madrasa, founded by Nasr al-Maqdisi, also known as the Ghazzaliya in a tribute to the philosopher al-Ghazali (d. 505H/1111CE) who sequestered himself there until he had completed the writing of the celebrated work *Ihya al-Ulum Eddin* (The revival of religious sciences)[32].

Ibn Tulun Mosque in Old Cairo, eventually, became one of the centres of higher education in Cairo [33], and Ibrahim observed that the library of this Mosque contained some of the most celebrated works on medicine [34].

The Qarawiyyin of Fes had three separate libraries, the most prestigious of which being the Abu Inan Library, also known as the Ilmyia library, whose original building is still standing [35]. Founded by the Merinid Sultan, al-Mutawakkil Abu Inan, the library opened its doors to students and the general public in 750H/1349CE. An avid reader and collector, the Sultan deposited in his newly founded library books on various subjects that included religion, science, intellect and language, and he also appointed a librarian to take charge of the affairs of the library [36]. Other Moroccan towns also had large book collections in their Mosques [37]. Pedersen refers to the large numbers of

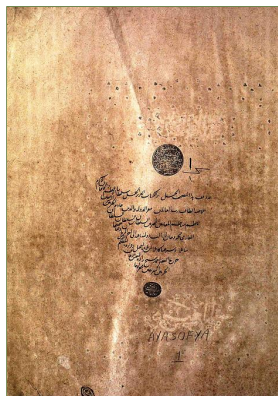


Figure 3. The cover page of a hand written Qur'an shows the signature of the owner of it. Suleymaniye Library, Ayasofya 1.

manuscripts that are found in the Mosques of Zaytuna in Tunis, Tlemcen in Algeria and Rabat in Morocco [38].

The Zaytuna of Tunis was possibly the richest of all. It had several collections totalling in the tens of thousands of books. It is said that most rulers of the Hafsid dynasty vied with each other for the prestige associated with maintaining and strengthening the book collection at the Mosque; which at some point exceeded 100,000 volumes [39].

Also in Tunisia, in Al-Qayrawan, the Great Mosque has preserved some of the remnants of its great intellectual apogee and memory of its scholars through books and documents they wrote in their own hands, or that they assigned others to write [40]. The richest collections of manuscripts assembled in the Mosque University of al-Qayrawan are those dating from its Aghlabid times (9th Century CE) [41]. These documents which included unique cultural data formed part of the curriculum taught at the great Mosque then [42]. The collection in the ancient library of Al-Qayrawan is in large part written on parchment, and is the largest and best known collection in the Arab Islamic world [43]. Mosque libraries also included large numbers of scientific works, and manuscripts no-one suspected they would possess. Abd al-Wahab located at the Qayrawan's Atiq Library an Arabic translation of *Tarikh al Umam al-Qadima* (history of Ancient Nations) which was written by Saint Jerome sometime prior to his death in 420CE [44]. Also, in the same Mosque library, the same Abd al-Wahab states that it holds works such as Pliny's on botany which was translated from Latin [45]. The Ahmadi Mosque in Tanta (Egypt) included manuscripts on 25 different subjects including medicine, arithmetic, algebra, and the art of dye making [46].

The Zaytuna had a library, al-Abdaliyah which had a large collection of rare manuscripts and which attracted men of learning from all parts [47]. When the Spaniards occupied Tunis between 940 and 981H/1534 and 1574CE, they ransacked its Mosques and libraries, and removed many of the precious books and manuscripts [48]. The Turkish dynasties which expelled the Spaniards restored and expanded the Zaytuna Mosques, its libraries and Madrasa and made it again a high centre of Islamic culture [49]. The Ottoman Bey, Ahmad Pasha I, did not just revitalise the Ahmadiya Library, he also organised and generously supported education at the Zaytuna, besides depositing large numbers of books in the Mosque [50]. New courses were introduced in 1896 including physics, political economy and French [51]. Scores of figures of Arab - Islamic culture received their education at Al-Zaytuna. Amongst these were Tawfiq al-Madani, and above all, Abdel-Hamid Ibn Badis, the figure behind the revival of Algeria's Islamic identity in the 1940s.

The rulers played a central role in the supply and maintenance of such libraries. Al-Manstansiryyah of Baghdad had a rich library made of great parts of books transferred from the very private library of the Caliph [52]. In Damascus, Nur Eddin Zangi gave large collections of books to the many libraries of the city [53], whilst in Cairo al Qadi al-Fadil presented his schools with 100,000 volumes on various subjects for the use of students [54]. In the Maghrib, Abu Yaqub, the Almohad ruler, Deverdun says, 'had a great soul and love for collecting books.' [55] He founded a great library, which was eventually carried to the Casbah, and turned into a public library, under the management of erudite Moroccan scholars [56]. In Spain, the Reyes of Taifas, Princes who succeeded the Umayyad dynasty in the early 11th century, also became celebrated for their libraries at Saragossa, Granada, Toledo, and elsewhere [57]. Some fifty years or so, before them, in the same country, Al-Hakam II's (349-365H/961-976CE) collection was estimated at between 400,000 to 600,000 books [58]. He engaged copyists and bookbinders, and had agents sent to every province to procure books for him by purchase and by transcription [59].

Private libraries also thrived. Under Almohad rule, in Morocco, lived the famed 13th century Maktaba of Ibn Tarawa, a great amateur chronicler, besides being a manuscript writer; the Maktaba of al-Qaysi and the Maqtaba of Ibn as-Suqr, the main librarian of the imperial library, his collection requiring five full camel loads to be carried [60]. Khizanat Sabur was established in the 11th century by Abu Nasr Sabbur b. Ardashir the minister under the Buwayhids in Baghdad. The library is recorded to have been a centre for eminent persons and learned men among whom discussion and debate often took place [61]. Amongst the scholars of Islam, there was none who could be found without a collection of books of his own. Shalaby concluded that the number of these libraries was equal to the number of learned people [62]. Both were in their thousands. The library of the physician Ibn al-Mutran, had, according to Ibn Abi Usaybi'a, more than 3,000 volumes; and three copyists worked constantly in his service [63]. Also we hear of a private library in Baghdad, in the 9th century, which required 120 camels to move it from one place to another [64].

A more impressive aspect of Islamic libraries was their organisation and management; remarkable as it proceeded out of not very much in terms of precedents. Descriptions of both public and private libraries speak of the classification of books and their arrangement in separate cases or even in separate rooms in the Baghdad libraries [65]. Great care, says Olga Pinto, was taken concerning the buildings which were to serve as public libraries. Some of them, like those of Shiraz, Cordova and Cairo, were placed in separate structures, with many rooms for different uses: galleries with shelves in which the books were kept, rooms where the visitors could read and study, rooms set apart for those in charge of making copies of manuscripts and rooms which served for literary assemblies [66]. There was accurate cataloguing of all contents to help readers. One single private collection required 10 volumes [67], whilst in Spain, the catalogue for the works in al Hakam's library is alleged to have consisted of 44 volumes [68]. The contents of each section of a bookshelf were also registered on a strip of paper attached to the shelf outside; which bore indications of works which were incomplete or lacking in some part [69]. Cataloguing of manuscripts was the norm, most particularly in the larger libraries where it was necessary to aid accessibility, and to give librarians control over the quality and quantity of their resources. Citing the book of *al-Jawza* by Ibn al-Qadi, Al-Fasi wrote that when the Abu Inan Library was founded in 750H/1349CE at the Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fez, its founder, Sultan al-Mutawakkil appointed a librarian whose first duty was to record the book collection [70]. During his investigation at Tunisia's Qayrawan Mosque, Shabuh unearthed a catalogue which was compiled in 693H/1293CE, and which is quite detailed in its description of the contents of the Mosque [71]. Until 1370H/1950 CE, the book collection of al-Azhar library, which by then had exceeded 120,000 volumes, was recorded in a sixty volume catalogue totalling about 3,500 pages [72]. A manuscript of that period was about the size of the modern book, containing good quality paper with writing on both sides, and bound in leather covers [73].

People could buy books. An average bookshop contained several hundred titles, but larger bookshops had many more on offer. The celebrated bookshop of Ibn al-Nadim, the tenth-century bibliophile and bookseller, was said to be on an upper story of a large building where buyers came to examine manuscripts, enjoy refreshment and exchange ideas [74].

Al-Fahrist, the catalogue of books that Ibn Nadim sold (contained in the shop or to which there was access), listed more than sixty thousand titles in an unlimited range of subjects: language and calligraphy, Christian and Jewish scriptures, the Qur'an and commentaries on the Qur'an, linguistic works, histories and genealogies, official government works, court accounts, pre-Islamic and Islamic poetry, works by various schools of Muslim thought, biographies of numerous men of learning, Greek and Islamic philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, Greek and Islamic medicine, literature, popular fiction, travel (India, China, Indochina), magic, miscellaneous subjects and fables! The first section of the first Chapter of al-Fahrist was devoted to various styles of writing (including Chinese), qualities of paper, 'excellencies of penmanship' and 'excellencies of the book.' [75]

People could also borrow books. Yaqut holds that he was permitted to take out no fewer than two hundred volumes on loan without depositing a pledge [76]. Maybe his is a rare case, but highlights the desire to spread access to the book. Book lending demanded rules and regulations, such as that readers were urged to take great care of borrowed books, not to write comments or correct any mistakes found in the book, but instead to report them to the librarian; and return the borrowed items by a given date [77]. Mosque libraries had their code of borrowing, of course [78], but also had their reader sections. The large Mosque libraries in particular provided their patrons with adequate facilities not just for reading, but also writing. They set aside adequately lit and comfortably fitted rooms with carpets, mats, and seating mattresses. The Sultan al-Mutawakkil, again, even ordered the construction of a 'zawiyat qurra,' or an enclosure for readers which were 'lavishly furnished and equipped.' [79]

It was the practice to appoint a librarian to take charge of the affairs of the library [80]. Such a duty was only for the most learned amongst men; those 'of unusual attainment,' were selected as custodians of the libraries [81]. The management of the Almohad libraries, says Ibn Farhun, was one of the privileged state positions, for which were selected only the best scholars [82]. Al-Tazi, for his part, points to the crucial role given to the librarians who were chosen from amongst the most proficient and learned people in society [83]. The Sufiya of the Grand Mosque of Aleppo library had Muhammad al-Qasarani, an accomplished poet and a man well versed in literature, geometry, arithmetic and astronomy in charge of it [84]. Such men, Mackensen notes, were, themselves, pleased to act as librarians. 'It speaks highly for the generosity of the patrons as well as for the really important work carried out in these libraries that men of marked ability in various fields felt it worth their while to undertake the duties of custodian.' [85]

Conclusion

Given Islam's love for knowledge and its elevation of scholars and writers to exalted positions, the evolution of a publishing industry was a foregone conclusion at the advent of Islam [86]. Within one hundred years after the advent of Islam, a sophisticated and highly integrated book industry was flourishing in the Muslim world. Techniques were evolved for each stage of book production: composition, copying, illustrating, binding, publishing, storing and selling. Reading books, as well as hearing them being dictated, became one of the major occupations and pastimes. In certain major cities, such as Baghdad and Damascus, almost half the population was involved in some aspect of book production and publication. However, book production was both an industry and an institution, an institution with its own customs and practices, its own checks against fraud and misrepresentation and, above all, an institution that ensured that learning and books were not the prerogative of a select few but were available to all those who had the desire. It also ensured that the scholars and authors themselves also benefited both economically and in terms of recognition from their work [87].

The literary necessities of a highly educated population, the multiplication of manuscripts, the requirements of innumerable institutions of learning, in turn stimulated the book industry [88]. Within two hundred years of the death of the Prophet, the book industry was to be found in almost every corner of the Muslim world [89]. Indeed, the whole of Muslim civilisation revolved around the book [90]. Libraries (royal, public, specialised, private) had become common; bookshops were to be found almost everywhere (small, large, those adjacent to Mosques, in the centres of cities, in collectives, in special sections of the bazaars); and bookmen (authors, translators, copiers, illuminators, librarians, booksellers, collectors) from all classes and sections of society, of all nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, vied with each other in the production and distribution of books [91].

The use of paper rather than papyrus or parchment also made books relatively cheap [92]. This subsequently had another decisive impact, when paper-making was transmitted to the West. The Europeans of the Middle Ages wrote on parchment, but its high price was a serious obstacle to the multiplication of written works [93]. The main benefit was to render immense services to the diffusion of knowledge [94]. Thus, as Pedersen sums up, by manufacturing paper on a large scale, the Muslims: 'accomplished a feat of crucial significance not only to the history of the Islamic book but also to the whole world of books.' [95]

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